

To begin to try and understand today's biblical story, "we need to remember that Jesus was a Jew, and his first followers were all Jews, all of them steeped in the Jewish tradition. Many Jewish followers of Jesus believed that for the Gentiles (the non-Jews) to become members of the church, they had to be circumcised and keep dietary laws" (Marianne Blickenstaff, *Connections*). Remember also that the Jewish and Christian religions as we know them today did not exist in these forms in the first century. In the chapter before today's story in Acts, the longest story recorded in Acts, Peter, has a vision from God and as a result of the vision, goes to see Cornelius, a centurion and a God-fearing gentile, to stay with him for several days. But in doing so, Peter knowingly (and in response to God's vision) had to let go of what he had long believed was faithful and break several Jewish purity laws. Can you imagine having something that you had been taught and believed your entire life be challenged by God's word?! Let us pray before reading God's word for us this day. **PRAY. READ. Acts 11:1-18.**

It's like a bomb has gone off in his faith community and Peter is standing there holding the detonator. Yet, Peter wasn't the initiator. God was and is. "At this point, God initiates a whole new direction in the life of the church: God declares that old distinctions between Jews and gentiles can no longer hold as they once did, and God gives the Holy Spirit to the gentiles" (*Intrusive God, Disruptive Gospel*, Matthew L. Skinner). Can you imagine how surprising/how shocking this news was especially to those who followed the Jewish law (the law of Moses)? Making gentiles full members in the community of faith- without any law-based condition

was bizarre- it was seen as unfaithful, unclean. Who wants to denigrate God's holiness? The law was kept to show obedience to God and to receive God's mercy. The law included circumcision, Sabbath observance, dietary laws, and other practices that showed what it meant to identify as a Jew and to submit one's whole self to God. Notice this wasn't the church's decision to make this unexpected change. This was something God has done (*workingpreacher.org*, Podcast 2019).

As today's story in Acts reveals, word had quickly spread about the Gentiles welcoming God's word, and Peter had some 'plaining to do to the church leaders in Jerusalem. As it is one thing for faithful Jews who follow Jesus, like Peter and Paul, to baptize Gentiles; it is quite another for them to break purity laws by eating with those who are unclean; the uncircumcised. So Peter goes "up to Jerusalem" to face the circumcised believers. In Jewish tradition travel in any direction toward Jerusalem is always upward. Why? The temple mount is "the place of highest importance on earth" (*The CEB Study Bible*). Needless to say, though Peter was heading upward, as soon as he got there, it went downhill from there, at least at the beginning. Peter was criticized for eating with the Gentiles, and he was in good company, as Jesus was also criticized for eating with sinners. Notice Peter doesn't deny the accusation. Instead, he takes the opportunity to retell the story "step by step" (11:4). He tells the story to make it very clear that God was in charge here. Peter at first doesn't know what to make of this vision, and he wrestles with what to do. If he eats anything unclean, he will be defiled and will violate God. Can't you imagine how uncomfortable and

disturbing this is for Peter? But the voice from heaven persists- three times- telling him, “What God has made clean you must not call profane” (10:15). He then discerns that Jesus came to fulfill the Law, which is more powerful than cultural rules. As a matter of fact, Jesus rejected ritual purity as a measure of spiritual status. Upon arrival at Cornelius’ home, Cornelius tells him how the angel had told him how he and his entire household could be saved. Notice that God had spoken to Cornelius before Peter arrived. As soon as Peter began to speak with Cornelius and other gentiles about Jesus, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as the Spirit fell on those gathered at Pentecost. And then Peter remembered Jesus’ words, “John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit” (v. 16). “God might be opening up new realities, but they are realities consistent with everything Jesus said and did” (Skinner). Baptism was soon becoming the new symbol for inclusion in God’s kingdom over circumcision, which excluded women. The problem for circumcised believers is that baptism doesn’t differentiate its recipients into categories such as “clean” or “unclean” or “male” or “female” or “Jew” or “Gentile.” And this may have very well been at the root of the circumcised believers’ accusation.

Peter wraps up his story by saying that God has changed the rules by giving the gentiles the same gift God had given to the Jewish believers. There is no longer a distinction between Jew and gentile. After hearing Peter’s words, the “apostles and believers, calmed down, and they praised God” (v.18)- concluding that God had enabled the Gentiles to repent and receive new life. Talk about a 180? The gentiles weren’t the

only ones experiencing a change in heart and life. Notice how the anxiety lessens and the praise flows, as their hearts and minds open up to something different and very challenging. This is when you know it's the surprising work of the Holy Spirit- only something God can do.

You know the saying, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." Well, many use that as an excuse to say that they can't change, yet, we never become too old, too practiced at living the Christian life to be exempt from the need having *our hearts and minds change*. Because with God nothing is impossible. Look at German pastor Martin Niemoeller (1892-1984), who protested Hitler's anti-semitic measures and was eventually arrested, and then imprisoned for eight years for standing against Hitler. "In words that paraphrase those of Peter, Martin once confessed, 'It took me a long time to learn that God is not the enemy of my enemies. He is not even the enemy of his enemies'" (Dan Clendenin, journeywithjesus.net). We're all becoming, as the Spirit works within each of us challenging and radically expanding our understanding of God's reach and hospitality and love. We're all on a journey in faith. And this change didn't happen overnight in Peter's day. No, it was hard news for some circumcised believers to swallow and some didn't- each trying to be faithful. It takes a good while for this unexpected change to sink in. Just as I imagine it takes more than three times for any of us to discern what the Spirit is saying to us today. "Discerning God's intentions and altering our assumptions about people and how to live are always acts of faith that take time" (Skinner, p. 85). All the more reason why "it is imperative that we engage with others different from

ourselves, in more than superficial ways. And most of the time it will not happen when 'us' is keeping our distance from 'them,' as somehow we have convinced ourselves that those people, 'them' are unclean anyway; that they are accustomed to risk, to death, to the absence of salvation or wholeness" (Smith). I'd invite those of you who haven't been to lunch here at Triune to take a risk and come and eat with us. Build relationships and listen to one another's stories. Discover commonalities. God's Spirit is present every time we gather at the table together. I've been pondering this week Peter's profound question which led to the point of his defense and the silencing of the crowd. If God gave them the same gift he gave us who believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, then who am I to stand in God's way (v.17)? Who am I- who are we to try and limit the mission of God to redeem the world? Yet, putting others down as being unclean and impure, "drawing boundaries between In and Out and Us and Them, hating our enemies, all that is easy. Loving indiscriminately is hard" (Clendenin). And I witnessed this just a week ago as a colleague of mine, whom I've gotten to know through the Justice Network, was wrestling with and asking himself and others Peter's very question. Trinity Lutheran Church, beside Towers East, has a queer led healing service once a month. It is a beautiful and meaningful service. Word got out about a few drag queens coming to lead, and a protest was planned. The pastors and the staff at Trinity received death threats and have been told that they, like the LGBTQ+ community, are going to hell. My colleague, who thinks differently theologically from me on homosexuality, called me a week or so before the service at Trinity to talk and to ask me to join him in prayer about it,

as he knew the people protesting, and he also knew the leadership at Trinity. While he thought the protest wasn't "of God," he does not agree with what Trinity is doing and yet, as he puts it, "I respect what each church believes, and they have a right to say what they believe." He was discerning what God wanted him to do. He came to the service and addressed the protestors, who were wearing red like he was, asking them to pray instead of carrying their signs, and they did what he suggested. He asked if any of them would join him in the healing service, and they told him that they weren't spiritually mature enough to come. He came by himself, and I sat beside him, as I was also sitting beside one of the pastors of Trinity to support her and others there, as we all worshiped God together. I could tell he was very uncomfortable, and I wondered if he knew that he was among his siblings in Christ. I can't say that his mind was changed. That's up to God and really none of my business. But I know he was trying to be as faithful as he knew how just as we all were. As I looked around those gathered there, I was in awe of people's courage amidst all of the hurt from some Christians. And I also thought of my colleague's presence there as an act of faith just as much or more than mine was, and I respect him greatly for his courage and his witness as well. He reminded me that the protestors outside were also God's children. See how easy it is to form an "us" against "them" mentality!

Both the Gentiles in Cornelius' household and their circumcised fellow believers have been offered repentance- a changing of hearts and lives- that leads to new life. That's right- both the "us" and the "them." "There

is a fine balance between remaining true to our roots in our faith and at the same time being open to new growth. Peter did not come to his new insight about the inclusion of the Gentiles without a lot of prayer, discerning God's vision and a willingness to be open to change" (Blickenstaff). With God's help, Peter found that balance. What about you? Labels such as "clean" and "unclean" are God's to determine and to remove, not humanity's. Peter's vision marks a real change in the Christian community. What matters is not our status or acceptability, but that God was in Christ making acceptable the unacceptable (paraphrasing Paul Tillich). We can love one another because God has first loved us even when we were unlovely. We don't have the keys to the kingdom- nor do we get to judge who is in and who is out. God is the one in charge, and God's Spirit is still very much alive and at work. How is God's Spirit drawing the circle wider in you and in those around you? Amen.